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CHRISTOLOGY IN THE MAKING

Edited by
Samuel Rayan

ISSN 0970 - 1125

Vol. XXI No. 123

jeevadhara

A JOURNAL OF 'CHRISTIAN' INTERPRETATION

Christology in the Making

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Jeevadhara
Kottayam-686 017
Kerala, India
Tel. (0091) 481. 7430

National Seminar on PEOPLE'S THEOLOGY

June 8—11, 1991

in connection with 20th year of publication of

JEEVADHARA

Inauguration by **Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios**

Main Paper by **Dr. Samuel Rayan S.J.**

Paper by **Sr. Corona O.S.M.**

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Paper by **Dr. Sukumar Azhikode**

Responses and Workshops

Seminar Papers and findings of Discussions with the
Seminar Statement will be published in Book form.

JEEVADHARA

is published every month
alternately in English and Malayalam

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Editorial

This is christology — latent, implicit, shy.
It concerns the Word of life. Or rather,
It concerns the Word become flesh.
It is about the flesh of life
which we have heard,
which we have seen with our eyes and have looked upon,
and touched with our hands,
and have suffered in our hearts,
and in our bodies.

This is christology in the making. The continuation of the Son-of-God's flesh-becoming. The passion of Jesus in progress in the body of God's oppressed children. Making up for what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. And for what is lacking in the victory of the Liberator through the people's resurrection within their awakening, their new awareness, their movements, their revolts, and their (fragmentary) liberations.

Some friends have been gracious enough to share with us a little of their life and their experience of Jesus: their experience of Jesus' faithfulness, challenge, power and mystery. It has not been easy for them to be auto-biographical. Their modesty yielded to friendly pressure. But it is more than that. It was to the cause that they succumbed: the cause of the people which Jesus discerned as the cause of God on God's earth. The contributors to this volume are persons committed in various fields and ways to God's cause on this earth which is the cause of Jesus, which is the cause of the people struggling for life and rice, for dignity, freedom, participation and community. Women and men who have opted to walk with people struggling in the Galilees and Judeas and Calvaries of our lands against the Herods, Caiphases and Pilates of our days. Women and men who have compassion

on the multitude and insist on rice for them when they are hungry; who see them harassed and oppressed like sheep without a shepherd and are ready to risk their life to shelter them and care for them; and who know that what is done for the least among the little ones touches the Person of Jesus and creates waves in the Realm of God. Women and men ready to give God a helping hand as he pulls down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, the hungry and the outcast. As Mary of Nazareth did.

The first two contributions, one by Tom Kochery and the other by Philomin Mary and her Colleagues, tell of how seeds planted in us in early years sprout and grow like Jesus' mustard seed and become great trees, sheltering the laboring classes and the deprived peoples. They proceed to trace the changes which have come over religious orders and religious training systems: a shift from inward-looking, abstract, non-incarnational spiritualities to involvement in God's world and God's struggles, and to response-ability to God's search for human partners to build the new earth. Both pieces describe the sufferings and struggles of fisherfolk. It is there above all that the writers have met Jesus face to face and touched his wounds, and begin to grasp afresh the meaning of the incarnation, the passion and the resurrection of Jesus.

Sujita has similar observations to make on the process of her own and her order's evolution towards a creational-incarnational-resurrectional faith and spirituality. Her experience of Jesus is bound up with her life among some of Bihar's outcasts. In the rich humanity of these untouchables and in the process of their growth towards courageous and responsible action, Sujita has met Jesus. Jesus is of her Dalit friends' flesh and blood. Jesus is not an abstract idea nor a theological construct. His fleshness was there in the Dalits' humiliation and squalor, and his cross was there in Dalit suffering. And on that cross was his broken Body, crying through Dalit wounds, "God, our God, why have you forsaken us?"

Sina's meditation reflects a profound sensitivity to the poor. It is the final blossom of a childhood-openness to God. Turning steadily and lovingly to the Sun, the Lotus has discovered the tearful and pain-ploughed face of the Earth. The piece is the refined voice of 25 years of committed service, full of anger and of compassion, among the poor of rural Kerala.

Pramila is sharing with us something very personal and intimate: a little of the immense agony of a body badly burned in an accident and the anguish of a soul roasted in another, related fire; and a faith summoned to burn without becoming charred and consumed. Pramila's cry is echoed in the cry of Job and the cry from the cross on Calvary. We are in front of a burnt offering, and participating in an act of worship. We are standing before a Burning Bush and receiving a commission to go, struggle and liberate.

The 13 brief meditations on the meaning of Jesus, based mainly on the "I am" sayings of Jesus, are the gift of two friends who are now married to each other and have opted to live in a village as farmers, enjoying the company of hills and streams and of birds that come to claim their share of the rice they grow. The pieces were written between 1984 and 1990. In Susy's poems, the 'I am' voice of Jesus mingles with the faith voice of the suffering poor; their cross, bombs strewn among them, the desert of their life, the betrayals, the solitary confinements and trials, the dark alleys, the broken being, the wail of the victims, the torture and the anger, and the salt of tears, and lies about life. But also the truth about bread, and the light in Christ's (and our) eyes, the new song on our lips, the door which provides wings, and feet that have bells. Ranjit, Susy's friend, reflects on the same words, but the mood and the thrust are different. His is critical reflection on what we have made of Jesus and Jesus' own self-portrait. Ranjit sees verified in our midst what Jesus had warned us against. The light of our body can become darkness; how dense and deep, then will not darkness itself be! The salt can become "dumb" and deserve to be thrown out. The aroma of Christ can act as a fragrance unto life, or as a stench unto death. And Jesus himself is a sign set for the rise of many and for the fall of many. Jesus is no automatic mechanism spinning our salvation. The Bread He is has to be "eaten", assimilated, lived, and not just exhibited around. The Way He is must be walked, and not merely photographed. Ranjit's concluding piece is key to the meaning and thrust of the other songs.

Aloysius Fernandez retraces with us his journey as a cleric and as people's servant, and lets us share in his quest, his experiments and struggles. We are allowed to witness the point of

time that marked his definitive baptism into the reality of the people. A point of no return; the choice of the road that leads sooner or later to Golgotha where death awaits, and in the heart of death, new Life!

These are autobiographical sketches. Live portions of human hearts. Accounts of what women and men have seen and heard and touched with hands and hearts, of the Word of life, of the Flesh of life. It is with reverence we shall receive them. Each of them is a christology, a whole christology, or a sketch of it, or a seed of it, or a promise of it. Latent and hidden; in solution, as it were. Too deep, and too much the people's not to be shy of verbalisation and systematic exhibition.

A christology, to be read not with the scientific eye;
nor with the techniques of swift diagonal reading;
but with the heart
which alone sees reality truly
and tastes it.

Samuel Rayan

Where I met Jesus

A seed sprouts

As a little boy I studied in a convent school, and I used to go to school with my sisters. One day mother gave us 4 annas, quarter of a rupee, to buy sweets. As we came to the gate, mother called out and said, "If you don't mind you may give the money to beggars." Her words lay lightly on us, for we very much wanted to buy sweets. Stopping at the small shop in front of the school we asked for sweets worth 4 annas. We were about to get them when an open hand stretched before us asking for alms. We gave the money away and without sweets went into the class-room. I felt good for I had done something great ! The experience left a mark on me and my life. I tasted the joy of helping the poor. I wanted to work for the poor, to spend my life with them, to feel one among them. That incident was a call. In those days working for the poor meant becoming a missionary, living away from home, in the midst of poor people, serving them in every way.

In the high school I was a sort of leader, good at mathematics, weak in English and Hindi. I had a spiritual guide in our headmaster, a priest. An asthma patient, he used to go from time to time for some rest to Kanyakumari, and describe on his return the life of poverty and struggles of the fisherfolk. I began to dream of working with them. After my high school studies I was advised against joining the university for fear I should lose my vocation. I disagreed; I thought that a vocation so easily lost could not be worth much. I was convinced that a genuine call from God cannot be subverted by circumstances.

It was in my college days that I had to undergo an operation in St. Thomas Hospital, Changanacherry, run by the Medical Mission Sisters. I lay in the general ward, unable to sleep for pain. Sister Agnes, with a lantern in her hand, used to visit the

ward every night, and cheer me with a smile as she passed. To me she represented self-less service. I wanted to work like that in a hospital, as doctor and priest, available round the clock ministering to people's spiritual and physical needs. But later my friendly Archbishop Mathew Kavukatt advised me to choose between being priest and being doctor since canon law does not allow both. In my final year in the college I met a Redemptorist priest whose rich humaneness attracted me and helped to define my call. I decided to become a Redemptorist and work among the poor. But soon I learned from the priest that the order would provide no such opportunity despite the fact that St. Alphonsus had founded it for involvement with the poor. I could join if I took it as a challenge and was ready to fight through to my basic dream of being with the needy. I accepted the challenge.

The novitiate was a meaningless routine of piety cut off from the world, with a spirituality centred on a God living in heaven and having little or nothing to do with our earth. There was no challenge. No contact with people. No newspaper to read. Theology too began as drab and pointless as ever. But then came Vatican II, and with it a new hope and fresh courage to fight. The first fruit of our struggle was access to newspapers. And the next was opportunity to work among the slum people. This gave us new life. Theology and philosophy began to warm up and to have a face. New books began to come, bringing in the spirit of the Council, and theology of liberation, and new approaches to the Bible. I began to enjoy Bible reading and prayer even as opposition to our involvement with the poor was mounting among superiors and professors. The suffering for this cause also seemed costly. Nine of us got canonical warning. Still the work went on, and the seminary became a place for the poor boys around.

After my ordination in April 1971, I went with two companions to Raiganj to work among the refugees, victims of the Bangladesh war. The experience of living so close to such sufferings and hardships and the exposure to Calcutta's slums gave my Eucharist new depths and made it a living experience. Then instead of holidaying in Kotagiri I did a month's course in Socio-Political analysis at the ISI, Bangalore, and another month's course in Liberation Theology at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore. These experiences and courses proved (to be) turning

points in my life. Till then working with the poor had meant helping them and giving them some money if possible. Work in the slums of Bangalore meant development projects to enable the needy to stand on their own feet, or informal education to equip them for a job that would give them some security in life. Now it began to mean paying attention to the social dimensions of reality, and to the structural causes of poverty. Unless the poor become aware of this and struggle to tackle them, poverty cannot be wiped out. Socio-political analysis with the help of Marxian tools helped me to understand society better. Luke 4:18 became pivotal for my priestly ministry. The Exodus, Leviticus 25, the Prophets, the Magnificat, the Beatitudes and other biblical passages became vibrant and dynamic living realities. The sufferings of Jesus became clear. And the Word of God became source of inspiration and sustaining strength.

With fisherfolk

My plan to go and work in Calcutta's slums was changed through the intervention of some confreres who had just completed a Mission in the coastal parishes of Kerala and had seen the magnitude of poverty and exploitation there. I should work among these fisherfolk, they suggested. And preaching should be supported by action for justice. I was surprised and delighted to see my old dreams suddenly come true. The Word became Flesh — was the thought uppermost in my mind at the time. I moved to Muttada, in Tiruvananthapuram district and went to meet Bishop Peter Pereira. The Bishop took me to different coastal parishes, and persuaded me to take charge of Poothura parish for a while and win the trust and friendship of the people before trying out my longing to live in a hut right in the midst of the fisher people without any kind of office, power or privilege.

As parish priest I worked alone for six months and was then joined by James and Mathew and a batch of Medical Mission Sisters. Together we enlisted people's participation in the Eucharist, organised Balwadies, tuition programmes for children, credit unions and catechism for all, with evaluation and planning sessions every Friday. These services continued and massive general missions for renewal in the entire area were added even after the death of Bishop Pereira and the departure of James and Mathew for Wynad. Whenever I could, I joined the fishermen n

pulling the *kambavala*, and got for my work my share of the catch. But soon enough conflicts began to develop, and agitation became necessary.

In 1978 the Anjengo Boat Workers' Union was formed in order to protect the people against corruption and exploitation rampant in the Anjengo RDC Project. When the Corporation seized all the boats, the union declared agitation, and I decided to go on an indefinite fast in front of the Secretariat. Support came from all the coastal parishes. The Fisheries Minister called a Conference and worked out a settlement. This successful coming together inspired us to form the Tiruvananthapuram District Fishermen's Union. This union remained my responsibility even after my retirement from the Poothura Parish. By now the *Kerala Swatantra Matsya Tozhilali Federation* had been founded. In 1979 Paul Arackal went on a fast, demanding compensation for Kattoor Babu who had been killed by a trawler. There was the additional demand for a Marine Fishing Regulation Act to be passed in the legislative Assembly. Both these demands were conceded and the fast ended. The Act was passed in 1980, and according to its provisions trawling during June, July and August was banned in 1981. But within a week the ban was partially lifted under pressure from trawler owners. The Union went into action, courted arrest at the Fisheries Director's office, picketed the Minister's house while Joyachen Antony and I started an indefinite fast before the Secretariat, and Fisher-folk blocked air, rail and road traffic. The stir was called off with the appointment of Babu Paul Commission to suggest ways and means of conserving fish resources.

In May 1982 the fishermen of Anchutengu clashed with those of Poothura. In the police firing that ensued Gilbert of Poothura was killed. The situation was tense, and getting worse with trading in rumours. Sensing the trouble I hastened to the scene and shuttled between the two places in an attempt to quell rumours and bring about peace. The next night I was arrested and detained by Lakshmana, the SP of Rajan murder case, who could be heard from my cell dictating an FIR replete with lies, accusing me of conspiring to murder the police. I sat in the filthy jail in distress but with deep inner peace, and thought about this land of democracy and of the Mahatma. I realized that justice was costly. Justice has to be fought for; it is not given on a

platter. It cannot be taken for granted. Not every aspect of the State system is structured to serve justice or human rights. Justice and democracy are distant visions, not only here in India but all over the world. This was only the beginning of my journey, the starting point of a new life. This was my baptism. The strength that came from the memory of Jesus, falsely accused and jailed, became an almost tangible inner reality. Out on bail on the 5th day, I was moved to see the anger, the tears, the solidarity of the people waiting for me outside the jail, and to hear of rallies organised by Joyachen Antony and memorandum signed by some 85 priests protesting against my arrest and the charges falsely fabricated against me. In the elections that followed, the people of Anchutengu rejected the Congress (I), some 65% of them casting their votes against it for the first time in our history of Independence.

I left Tiruvananthapuram at the instance of the local Bishop. But I continued to work with the fisherfolk, and was elected chairman of the National Fishermen's Forum, and conducted a series of meetings in various parts of the country on the theme Fisheries Development and Fish Workers, in preparation for an International Conference called by the FAO to assemble in Rome. The NFF sent 10 delegates to the Rome Conference.

Agitation

In 1983 the KSMTF organised a massive agitation to secure a ban on monsoon trawling. Father Albert Parisavila, the President of the Federation issued a statement calling off the agitation. This situation forced us to polarise and split, the vast majority of fishworkers continuing under the banner of the KSMTF with Jose Kaleekal as its new president, and Parisavila forming an organisation called All Kerala Fishermen's Federation. All along, it had been obvious that there were two opinions and approaches. There were ideological differences. There were two ways of looking at obedience to the Bishop: dumb and blind submission and community obedience to the Mission and to God's demands embedded in historical situations. There were two ways of looking at problems and responses, and two different kinds of Faith. One was a total institutional commitment, the other was commitment to the Spirit of Jesus alive in our midst. There were then two different types of theological approaches and spiritualities. Given

this fact, division was inevitable. Division, struggle, and processes of unity must continue. That is part and parcel of our existence. There is no short-cut to unity. No amount of blind submission and uniformity will bring about true unity. Unity can be achieved only through hard struggle for truth and justice.

In 1984 the KSMTF organised a massive agitation which was historic in every respect. Sisters Philomin Mary and Alice Lukose and Mr Velayudhan became symbols of sacrifice and secularity. The Left Front came out in support of the fisherfolk's demands. The NFF took the initiative in forging solidarity with other Trade Unions. The National Unions were not interested in collaboration. However the Hindu Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat (Trade Union) led by George Fernandes, the Kamkar Agadi led by Dr. Datta Samant, and some other unions came together to chalk out a joint struggle. The agitation's success in terms of our concrete demands was limited. But several more vital points were scored and larger perspectives helped to develop. The struggle implied a clear break with communalism and a new practice of secularity. It included a move from authoritarianism towards democratic processes. The action transcended caste dimensions and took on dimensions of the working class. The agitation helped place the long-ignored cause of fisherworkers at the centre of national and international attention. It provoked studies and documentation which threw light on and gave support to the workers' demands. It occasioned a spirited, though not always well-informed, discussion on Liberation Theology in all the leading secular papers in India. The Church as an Institution exposed itself as standing with the rich and the ruling class. The agitation was a prophetic witness of priests, sisters and lay people; it was an ecumenical event in which Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Marxists and Secular Humanists worked together for justice for the poor and the oppressed.

In December 1987 the general body of the NFF met in Bangalore and had a sharing of many case-studies focusing on pollution of water in different parts of the country, destruction of mangroves, and also on tourism. It was decided to take up a campaign with the slogan, Protect Water, Protect Life. It was to include a series of seminars and consultations with other environmental groups, trade unions, and concerned persons in many

parts of India. The consultations were completed, the seminars were held, finances secured, posters and stickers printed and distributed, and all preparations made in detail and with care with the collaboration of friends all over the country. The actual March started from Calcutta and Bombay on 2nd of April, and ended on 1st May, 1989, at Kanyakumari. Everything went well all along, everything was orderly, beautiful, instructive and friendly. And it was coming to an equally beautiful culmination with the nearly 15,000 strong meeting at Kanyakumari when on a sudden chaos erupted. There was confusion, firing and people were wounded. It was the mischief of the police and their agents, themselves agents of the ruling cliques. For the Kanyakumari March was not simply environmental. It had socio-political and economic implications. It was seen by the powers that be, the powers that destroy millions of people who depend on nature, as a threat to their vested interests. The Atomic Energy lobby, the Industrial lobby, the Trawlers' lobby all became alarmed at the thousands of people coming from all parts of the world marching in protest against their killer policies and pointing to new approaches to water and earth and life and the rights of the underprivileged masses of women and men. The lobbies and the ruling class did not want the public meeting to take place. They did not want Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer to speak or resolutions to be passed, or new-creative orientations to find unity and focus. But the power lobbies did not know that gun-shots could not dishearten the people. The people continued their protest the following day. They cancelled their journeys and sat in determined protest in front of the Collectorate. V. R. Krishna Iyer condemned the outrage in letters to Karunanidhi and V. P. Singh. People's power cannot be extinguished with bullets.

I deem it a privilege to be graced with the opportunity to be with fisher-folk. It is an honour to have all these friends. The call to work with them has been in fact a call to be evangelised by them. Through their folksy religiousness and rich humanity the Gospel of Jesus has come to me with great freshness, free of insipid and dead institutional and academic verbiage. The commitment of the crucified people of Poothura and elsewhere has interpreted the cross to me and made Jesus very real. The Kanyakumari march was an experience of his presence with us every-

where to the corners of the earth and to the completion of history. He who was crucified and raised for the sake of the poor and in defence of the oppressed is very relevant to and meaningful in our situation. He walks with the millions of the crucified people of this land. The Christ of the big churches, the Christ in the golden tabernacles, the Christ clad in costly vestments does not relate to the millions living in misery and squalor on this globe. He has little or no meaning for them. But there is a Jesus who sits down with the hungry women and men and shares in their shame and weakness. He rebuilds their pride and opens their eyes to the truth of their condition and to the path that leads to life and freedom. When millions struggle for justice, Jesus is there with them. And I know that if I side with them I also stand with him.

President
National Fishermen's Forum
Chururashmi Centre
Valiathura
Tiruvananthapuram - 695 008
Keralam.

Tom Kochery

Casting the Net on the Right Side

Perspectives

I was brought up in traditional beliefs; belief in a God who lived far away and was in another world, who wanted to be feared, respected and loved. God was for me someone who held all good things to himself and doled them out to people in proportion to the good works they did. I also believed that God always punished 'bad' people. Even in my early training as a religious, these beliefs underwent little change. Individual holiness was emphasised, and holiness was measured by good works done, and obedience given to the letter of the law, as well as time spent in personal and community prayer.

After Vatican II and our 1967 Chapter which introduced major constitutional changes, and alerted us to the root causes of so much suffering and oppression of the poor, and redefined healing as concern for the wholeness of the person in all his or her individual and social dimensions, a different attitude and orientation developed in our life and work. Medical Mission came to be understood as summons to work for the healing not only of wounded bodies but of broken spirits as well, and especially of diseased and distorted social structures. To be able to render this service we have to live with the people and participate in their quests and struggles.

To share in the experiences of the people, some of us moved in to live with the fisherfolk of Anchutengu, a coastal village in the district of Tiruvananthapuram, Keralam. Living with them and joining in their struggles, we came face to face with the inhuman conditions in which they have been forced to exist; the dire poverty, massive ignorance, multiple oppression and an environment nurtured to breed diseases. We have been reflecting as a group on the linkage between the mission of Jesus and our life-

experience with the people. What we discovered in the process has inspired and guided us in our activities.

We see Jesus as the liberator of the people from everything that enslaves, be it social, economic, cultural or religious. The word in Luke 4:18, which is Jesus' manifesto and Luke's précis of the major thrust of Jesus' ministry, has become pivotal for our thought and work. We see Jesus as the giver of life, of life in abundance (Jn 10:10), deeply concerned about bread for the hungry and honour for the outcast (Mk 2:13-17; 6:30-44). We are moved by his word: When you did it to the least of my brothers/sisters, you did it to me (Mt 25:40). Jesus' meaning for us is expressed in our life with the people. The face of Jesus Crucified comes alive in the face of the starving children. His scourged frame appears in the hard working women battered by their alcoholic husbands. His mocked person is identified in the ill-treated and the illiterate; in children unloved and uncared for; in the men who come back empty-handed and despirited after a night's sweat and toil on the high seas; and in the sick and the ailing who for lack of means get no treatment and care. The list could be stretched without end. The situation calls for action. For it is deeply dehumanising. People have to struggle and toil without respite for life's basic needs, for livelihood and sheer survival to begin with.

Struggles

The struggle to get trawling (a devastating way of fishing with nets that plough the bottom of the sea and ruin the ecosystem essential for fish to breed) banned during the monsoon months in order to save fish from annihilation and the fisherfolk from starvation, started already in 1981. Our agitation which we carried on through rallies, *dharnas*, picketing, fasting and jail-going succeeded in getting some, — only some — of our demands met. But the experience of suffering, frustration and rejection deepened our faith, brought us nearer to the wounds of the Crucified Jesus. What we endured was but a continuation here and now of what He had to bear. He was persecuted and killed because

- he cured the sick on the sabbath;
- he questioned the religious and political leaders for their callous and unjust treatment of the people;

- he reversed the judgment of religious leaders on a woman taken in adultery;
- he ate with the outcast and befriended publicans and sinners and the socially despised;
- he set aside the letter of the law in order to follow its intent by serving the people;
- he did not perform rituals nor cling to temples but summoned people to worship God in spirit and in truth, for it is mercy God wants, not sacrifice;

Jesus' concerns were centred on people and life; on services and actions calculated to empower the people and enhance their life. We have had many occasions to experience the presence and power of Jesus working in and through the people.

One such occasion was the exodus of over 500 people walking in downpour the 70 kilometres from Kollam to Tiruvananthapuram, for on the way they were received and fed by the fisherfolk of Mampally. Another experience of sharing Jesus' thirst of justice was the event of picketing railway at Kadakavur in 1984. Almost 2000 people were there. They were lathi-charged; 184 of them including children were arrested. Sister Mercy Kootiany reminisces: "When I was lifted by the police from the railway track and thrown on to the platform, I was confident I would not suffer any great injury. I felt no fear. Somebody seemed to be holding me up. And to everyone's surprise I stood up at once, unhurt." Those who were watching had feared Mercy's backbone would be broken. The 184 people who were arrested were taken in three groups to three different police stations. None of the groups knew where the others were; and mothers were separated from children and leaders were taken away and put in one group. There was great agony in this situation. There were twentyfive children below 10 years. Most of them were with Sister Mercy. One of them had diarrhoea, and as she went to wash the child at the public tap, two policemen flanked her. She felt keenly this insult of being treated like a criminal.

When the pickets were arrested, people rang the church bell and crowds collected. The parish priest did not move. The Marxist president of the *Panchayat* came to inquire after the detainees. The Democratic Youth Front India brought food for the

children, and served every one tea, little acts of kindness, indeed great and timely. The next day all the 184 were released, and were given a reception in the village with great joy and cheer.

In the same year several people went on an indefinite fast demanding ban on trawling. Some Bishops considered such fast risky and suicidal, and advised that it be given up. When it continued in spite of their instance it was even branded disobedience. For us, however, it was faith and love: it was a way of loving the oppressed neighbour and giving our life for the people that they might have some life at least, that they might at least survive. For us it was obedience to the truth of people, and therefore obedience to the truth of God, which is what obedience is all about. When the Bishop's orders were not complied with some of our friends withdrew their support. But we continued with peace of mind and full confidence that God was with us. Did we not have before us the example of Jesus' refusal to conform to the norms of religious and political leaders when these did not serve the cause of the lame, the blind, the broken hearted, the poor and the outcast? Has not Jesus affirmed that the hungry the homeless and the deprived are his vicars on this earth? And do not his apostles teach us that we ought obey God rather than men? The memory that Jesus was done to death for his option for the poor and his dissent from the powerful, energised us.

The Neendakara March was yet another event in which the Spirit of Jesus made itself felt. Astonishing self-control and silence were the people's response to ill-treatment. When two thousand fisher people and their friends marched to the Harbour demanding ban on trawling, the paid workers of boat owners provoked us with obscene calls and irritating slogans, and pelted us with fish and fish-water. We calmly ignored them and moved on to our destination.

A last occasion I would like to mention, when we felt the presence of Jesus among us, was the Kanyakumari March. In 1989 fisherworkers organised a national march from Calcutta and Bombay to Kanyakumari, demanding Protection of Waters and Protection of Life. Water is life; water was polluted and wasted in the name of development. We wanted to initiate a mass-movement to stop this process by pressurising the government and all concerned. At the end of the March at Kanyakumari almost 15,000

people gathered to voice our protest. But men with vested interests and the ruling powers conspired to crush it. They disrupted our meeting, fired at our gathering and lathi-charged the people indiscriminately. The people were scattered, many got hurt, one man lost his leg, and numerous persons suffered in various ways. We were fighting for the common good. It was once again a crucifixion experience. The paradoxical experience of seemingly God deserting us but really God drawing us near to his wounded flesh. The conviction that Jesus suffers in the suffering people gives the hope that one day we shall overcome. That hope sustains us and keeps us moving forward.

Silent depths

In our ordinary routine life with the people we meet Jesus in one another. The people are deeply rooted in the traditional teachings of the Church. They have been taught to accept their miserable condition as destined by God; and to suffer in silence all the indignities and treacheries practised against them. They have been shown a silent Jesus meekly submitting to torture and death. But the power of his silence as effective protest against all that oppresses was brought home to them through their own conscious struggles for livelihood and the right to live as human beings. A new outlook on life and new spirituality are emerging. Through the struggles and mutual interactions people have become aware both of their captive condition and of the power within them to liberate themselves. They are coming out of their dungeon of silence. An attitude of questioning, dissenting, protesting and alternative thinking is developing in their midst. Each time this is expressed, there is a shared experience of leaving old tombs and rising to new life.

People's habit of sharing from their meagre possessions; their concern for one another; their willingness to forgive and forget and to accept those who are socially down and out — are some ways in which they relate to and live out the enfleshing of the Word of God in the 'here and now' situation. Enfleshment was realized in Jesus' identification with the distressed and the rejected; and in his work of empowering the poor to stand for truth and justice. Every time people are thus empowered, every time they are enabled to add a human factor to the dehumanized situation, we experience something of the Energy, God released into our history in the person and life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus becomes explicitly present to us during our celebrations. We come together to reflect on our life, on our social and political struggles and the struggles within us. The celebrations when they are related to the realities of life, become vibrant and meaningful. Our mutual support and concern, our common purpose and direction, our commitment to the people — all these sustain us. Instead of spending time on abstract dogmas and devotions, our concern centres on the burning issues of the day: outrageous poverty, women's oppression, destruction of nature, waste of nature's resources, pollution of air and water, war and nuclear weapons, imperialism of super-powers and the many forms of domination and oppression. These are anti-life forces and activities while our concern is to bring life to the world — a concern which coincides with, and is called forth and nourished by the preoccupation of Him who comes that people may have life and have it in its fullness.

Twilight

In our early days we had hesitations about entering into people's struggles and about taking sides. When we departed from the established order of society and church, they tried to suppress us, citing scripture and doctrine: Love your enemies; all, rich as well as poor, are children of God; God wills the salvation of all men. We were reminded that religious are expected to be bridge-builders, not gulf-makers. We cannot take sides, we have to be with all, and keep out of politics. Our realm and area of concern is spirituality and apostolate, not politics and social work. God comes first. But our reflections on human beings, created in God's image and likeness convinced us that involvement in humanising activities is deeply spiritual and theological. This conviction is strengthened by our faith in God's desire to make humans free and creative. We also see clearly that in the ministry of Jesus the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the political are inseparable. Jesus was not crippled by dualism. And we know from every period of the biblical tradition that God who does justice is always on the side of the oppressed (Ps 103:6).

The poor also reject us when we do not pander to their vested interests, but challenge them to greatness. On such occasions we experience real powerlessness and complete helplessness. We feel frustrated. But our night enshrines the hope for the dawn. When the awakened people come out with collective power,

shaking the thrones of ruling classes and forcing them to comply with demands of justice, we know we are in contact with the resurrection of the dead. We know that it is when people struggle and suffer to overcome domination that the good news is proclaimed.

As Medical Mission Sisters, our call is to be the *active* presence among people of Christ the Healer. Our life with the poor makes us reflect and act at the root causes of sickness and poverty. While engaging in curative, preventive and promotive health-care, our aim is to reach for the basic needs of the people for a life which is humanly dignified. We have had many instances of "miraculous" cures. For example, Chellamma's delirium and high fever were attributed to possession by devil. Treatment by a witch doctor brought the girl to the point of death. It was only after a long fight with her relatives that we were able to take the girl to the hospital where she recovered and was well within a week. In such ordinary events the healing ministry of Jesus continues. Similarly non-formal education and conscientization enable the people to shed their feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness, and to be reborn to fresh awareness of the oppressive structures as well as of the power within themselves to transform them. All this is healing and a ministry of the resurrection.

People

Josephine says: "The work of non-formal education and awareness-raising is like Jesus teaching the people during his three years of public life". Her answer to critics is: "Jesus said, knock and it shall be opened, ask and you shall receive. Our struggle for our rights is knocking and asking". Another point she makes is that when the people were hungry Jesus was concerned and insisted on feeding them before sending them away. Jesus knows, food is necessary for man to live even as God's word is indispensable. Josephine sees Jesus in the people; he works through them. She recalls how Jesus has told us to meet him in our neighbour. She is convinced of his warning that it is not enough to call him Lord, Lord; it is necessary to do the will of God. And the will of God is human fulfilment beginning from the here and the now.

Carmely says: When we started to study the Bible relating it to the daily events of life, the Word of God became alive in us. Jesus is our liberator and saviour. He is no more someone who lived 2000 years ago; he is among us now. He is with the poor.

Our belief in an other-worldly heaven has changed. Now I believe that the Reign of God is to be realized and lived here. I used to count myself a Christian because I was baptized. Now I know I am a Christian as I do the work of Christ. When I participated in the struggles I realized the power in each one of us. But our problems are not individual. Only through solidarity among ourselves can we overthrow the powers of domination and exploitation. I believe Jesus is with us. Did not Jesus say, where two or three are gathered together in my name I am in their midst? All our struggles for ban on trawling, for better facilities in the market, for transportation facilities, for good drinking water and finer health care, and for women's rights — all these are liberating us from the degradation which had engulfed us. In these struggles we continue Jesus' liberating work.

When we set aside some of the traditions and rituals of society and religion, there is opposition resulting in suffering and loneliness. Jesus is the only source of courage and strength enabling us to bear all this. His assurance that what we do to the least of his brothers and sisters we do to him. He calls us to work for the liberation of people. It also sustains our spirit.

I find Jesus within and without, in me and around. And I relate to him as a person, asking him questions, arguing with him, complaining to him. Through others I receive his love and support. This solidarity bears me up in my loneliness.

Such testimonies could be multiplied.

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Philomin Mary and Colleagues

Cries of the Deprived

1. The call

Most of my early recollections of Jesus are bound up with the recital of routine prayers, attendance at Mass, and reception of sacraments. Jesus was the 'Sweet Jesus', and it was easy to see him in the golden monstrance, in the glorious sunset, and in the majestic mountains. But it did not take me too long to realize that the image of Christ in people was tarnished or distorted. In the course of my involvement with the poor I began to *see* Jesus in the not so glorious faces and eyes of the oppressed and the marginalised.

During the years of my religious formation I continued to be zealous in saying my prayers and being faithful to community life. Christ was the imprisoned Lord of the tabernacle, and I was to keep him close to my heart in prayerfulness. I do not mean to pass judgment on a particular spirituality, value system or religious tradition. But as I look back on my formative years, I can see a gap between my faith-life and the world of reality around me.

It was during my years as a junior professed sister that for the first time I had a glimpse of the life of the poor. Among the Dalits of rural Sasaram I witnessed brutal exploitation, dehumanizing poverty, powerlessness and fear. As a secure religious woman I found it difficult to enter into the agonies of the village people. In those days our 'exposure' was limited to 'visiting' the villages; there could be no question of sharing in the people's life and struggles. Nevertheless, I was often troubled by questions like: What does it mean to be a religious woman among these poor? What would evangelization be in this context? I began to feel the need to understand Christ in the light or the shade of the challenges I encountered before me.

After my final profession I spent several years in Bombay,

completing my education in mass media, communication and social work. On completion of my training I was appointed to our Communication Centre in Patna. It was very satisfying to conduct audio-visual seminars, and to teach television production especially to people who understood and appreciated the media. I came to see Christ in the context of my work: Jesus was the communication, the medium and the message of the Father's Love. I was secure and happy in this ministry, but did not realise that my christology was abstract and academic, not real and life-giving.

In March 1980 Father Mathew was murdered by miscreants in Sasaram, one of our mission stations where I had spent most of my juniorate. The tense and dangerous situation there led to the closure of that mission. In July of the same year there was a request for volunteers to go back to Sasaram. I vividly remember seeing that letter of request on our bulletin board. I read it and pushed the matter aside, saying, why should anyone go there again and get killed? After all, that is not the only worthwhile ministry on earth! But the request kept haunting me, and finally I got the challenge. I heard His call anew to work directly with the poor and to help them discover their dignity and rights and to struggle in solidarity with them to build a free and just community.

2. Involvement

Along with two of my sister companions I moved to Sasaram. It was there the most beautiful part of my journey in faith began. It was there that the Christ of the Beatitudes and the Mary of the Magnificat really became the inspiration and the power within me and my mission. We moved from village to village, listening to people, learning from their life, and reflecting on our role in their midst. We ate what they provided, slept in their huts or in the open, and walked miles to visit every village. We carried with us only the minimum necessities. With a sense of freedom and trust we lived from day to day. The poor gave us food, shelter and protection, and we depended on them. Though they never had enough for themselves, they always seemed to have enough to share with others. At the same time we did experience hunger, loneliness, rejection and hostility. These shook us free of our securities and dependence on self. Experiences of this sort changed our outlook and vision. They made us ask new questions: Why are so many people reduced to such subhuman

levels of existence while a handful of people are enjoying most of the wealth of the nation? A structural analytical understanding of poverty and exploitation and a relevant and timely response to it appeared to be an integral part of our faith-life.

Simultaneously, a re-reading of the Gospels from the standpoint of the poor began to reshape my faith and my understanding of Christ who was "made flesh" so that even physically his own body and blood belong to the poor. He became part of the deprived group. The question, Who is Christ for me and for the people today is a question I need to ask again and again. I was no more certain that the Christ I believed in so far and tried to share with others was the *real* Christ. I had conveniently adapted Him to my own pet interests and ideologies. After all, have not the religious, the rich and the exploiters no less than the exploited, the common believers and all of us painted Christ each in his or her favourite colours so that His image never disturbs anyone, and makes no one uncomfortable in any way? We cling tenaciously to the Christ and the faith of our childhood, never daring to question it, nor allowing it to grow and mature. Yet when I am convinced of certain realities because of my experience, and not because of any dogma, then the truth of my faith takes hold of me and becomes something I can touch and taste.

All my life Christ has been for me the real challenge and inspiration, inner freedom and strength. The freedom and love He lived out in radical option for the powerless becomes meaningful for me as I enter more deeply into the struggles of the marginalized. How am I to share this real Christ of the Gospels with the impoverished and exploited people? Do people see Christ in me, and do I see Christ in them? Once three of us sisters were walking from one village to another. Two men, Hindus, observed us for a while, and then one of them asked the other, "Who are these ladies? I see them always with the poor in the villages". His friend replied casually, "Oh, these are the women of a god called Jesus Christ." I wonder what that implied.

We lived with the poor in Sasaram, sharing their life, their agonies and hopes. We learned from them lessons in generosity and hope which we would have never learned elsewhere. Our life-style served as a counter-culture to, and a living criticism of, the secure, exclusive and comfortable life we lived formerly and

which many Christians, including religious, continue to live. I often struggle to see the significance of my religion, or of any religion for that matter, in the midst of such dehumanizing poverty and oppression. I asked myself, What is the faith-response my liberator God expects of me in this situation? I was disturbed that we, the followers of Christ, were more concerned about 'holy' practices and 'eternal life' while ignoring the cries of the deprived, or meeting them with acts of charity. Should not the faith-action of the Kingdom lead us to search out the root causes of poverty, to risk all securities, and to enable the people to stand together to claim their dignity and their freedom? The poor are privileged to participate in the liberating action of Jesus, and we are privileged to stand with them in solidarity. I believe that the liberation we hope for is a movement of the whole community away from structures of oppression towards a world of freedom and love. In this context, all that I have been associating with Jesus is taking on a new meaning.

3. The cross

I wish here to recall a small incident which has had tremendous impact on my life. It is all about the Cross. All our life we have seen the cross, worn it, venerated it, contemplated it as beautiful masterpieces of art adorning our magnificent churches, looked on it as symbol of our religious identity and power. But it was in December 1980 that I for the first time really saw the Cross of Christ in relation to life and mission. In the village where we lived, the Dalit poor stood in constant fear of the powerful landlords on whom they depended for their very survival. They had no security with regard to their meagre possessions, their work, their daily rice, their women, their very life. One day, as was their practice, a few Rajput youths came and tried to carry away the only chicken a poor Dalit widow owned. She fought to protect and retain her precious possession. The infuriated intruders beat her and her crippled old mother-in-law with a *lathi*, injuring them badly. We sisters came on the scene and intervened to prevent the murder of the women. The young men left, threatening to burn down the village, and kill everyone involved with this incident. Fear gripped the village. We gathered the people together to discuss what steps should be taken. We sisters knew that a Christ-like response to the situation would mean direct confrontation with the arrogant power. But we were also

clear in our spirit that such persistent injustice perpetrated by the rich should be denounced. That was a demand of our faith. Building up people's unity and self-confidence around this issue was important. For the first time in that place and in their life, the villagers decided to file a First Information Report with the police and to face the oppressor together as a community. The landlords tried to intimidate the Dalits and dissuade them from going to the police. But the people stood firm.

The next day two villagers along with two of us sisters went to the police station to inquire about the delay in the intervention of the police. When we reached our destination we found ourselves face to face with the gunman of the village and two of his gang, all of them with many murder charges against them. They were following every bit of our movements. And I felt that in our courageous stand for the exploited, Christ was being proclaimed in a unique way. From the police station we went to the additional District Magistrate to seek his support. The Magistrate's only response was: "You sisters go back to your schools and keep off from those landlords and village-fights. They are too tough for you." I felt angry and disappointed. The inner connections of the exploitative structure were becoming clearer. In total helplessness, along with my companion I boarded the bus to return to the village. Immediately two of the young men who had attacked the Dalit widow came inside the bus and motioned to the gunman and four other men to come in and occupy the two rows of seats in front of us and behind us, which had been kept vacant at their request. I sensed mischief and went cold with fear. A clear voice within me kept urging me to get off the bus immediately. Finally we managed to jump off an already moving bus and return in haste and fearful silence to our convent in town. It was evening. I very much wanted to get to the village and be with the people. But my sisters would not let me go. It was agonising to stay back when I knew that my people might need me with them. In frustration I went to our common room, locked the door, fell on my knees and wept. I was confused and helpless. Did we lead the people to fight a case which they can never win? Will they stand together to the end? Shall we have the freedom and the courage to stand by them regardless of consequences? Why did we get into this mess at all, and get the people into it too?....

A few hours may have elapsed. As I got up to leave the room my gaze fell on the Cross on the wall. I had looked at it often, but I had never really *seen* it. Now for the first time I *saw* the Cross. Now it was different. It spoke to me. A grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. To lose your life for Him and His Gospel, and His people, is to save it. A woman suffers birth-pangs, but through it she brings forth new life and rejoices over it. No option for the poor, no confrontation with the powerful can escape the cross, if indeed the action is patterned after Jesus' radical preference for the underprivileged. The cross is the dying aspect of every liberative action. To follow the Christ of the poor is to make things difficult for ourselves. From the cross alone can justice and liberation flow. In it we read the profound reality of struggle for freedom — freedom from hunger and humiliation, from exploitation, misery and greed for power.

I woke up early next morning, feeling strengthened and reassured, and determined to go through the struggle in the company of the poor to the end. There can be no question of protecting myself against the lot of the people after I have pitched my tent among them, and become flesh of their flesh. I must walk with them in the valley of death. In the hunger and misery of the poor, Jesus is nailed to the cross today. His cries, multiplied in the cries of the poor, rise to the Heavens asking for liberation. I join in the cry in a concrete way. Is that what prayer ultimately is? On reaching the village tea-stall, an old woman whispered to me, 'God really saved you last evening.' She knew what happens as a rule to people like us who cross the ways of the rich. Calvary is always present. The passion and death of Christ cannot be past events recounted for my meditation. They summon me now to de-class myself in order to be with the oppressed and the untouchables. They lay on me the cross of the poor, the shame, discrimination, failure, rejection, and hopelessness which Dalits are made to endure. Christ and His Cross come to me not always in the Sacraments, but in the deeply moving humanness of the dehumanized poor.

4. Baba and Maiya: Dalit but human

Let me illustrate what I mean. Now for several years I have been living and working with the most deprived and despised of Dalit

groups called Musahars, rat-eaters. A destitute Musahar family adopted me as their own. I lived in their hut. I called them Baba, father, and Maiya, mother; and they called me Beṭṭi, daughter. They were landless and assetless. During the harvest season my Maiya would go out early every morning, with a broom and a basket, to the rice fields of the landlords, and spend the whole day sweeping up the gleanings left behind by harvesters. She would dig into rat-holes and gather the paddy hidden away by the rodents. In the evening she would return home with the grain she had scraped together. But first she would come to my adult education class, not to study, but to have a look at me. We looked at each other as friends who had missed each other the livelong day! Meanwhile Baba too would come back with his collection of paddy. And both of them would sit there silently sifting the grain from mud and dirt, and then husking it. Hunger and fatigue are written all over them. Maiya makes a fire while Baba cleans the rice. Together they are getting ready the first meal of the day. I can get the smell of the cooking rice where I sit teaching. I can see Maiya wiping a steel mug with the tip of her saree and filling it up to the brim with cooked rice. With a twinkle of joy in her eyes and with much love Maiya would bring her precious gift of rice to me day after day, before tasting it herself. I don't need to explain much.

But how true it is and how significant that the hungry understand the Eucharist best, and become Eucharist for one another! Maiya has helped my insight into the meaning of the Eucharist as she shared the 'bread' blessed by her poverty, the 'bread' broken in her struggle to keep alive, the 'rice' given in unconditional love and acceptance. The Eucharist experience is indeed a 'Mother' experience: of birthing, nourishing, nurturing, sustaining, and enhancing Life, even when for the mother it means dying. It is thus I have come to see the Eucharist as a transformative power, and an exercise in our mission of creating a new world in which life can flourish in love and freedom and unity and peace. In persons like Maiya Jesus unfolds for us His own vision of the Eucharist which we are now invited to *Do* in His memory.

5. Solidarity, friendship

Solidarity with the poor in their struggle for liberation is the concrete expression of my faith-response to my call to mission.

And their solidarity with us embodies their faith, however implicit and hidden it might be. Hence personal friendship with the poor is very precious to me. It is in these relationships that Christ's companionship is made visible. They build the poor, they build me. I recall how once a close friend of mine, Sandra, was to visit me from California, on her last visit to India. Due to some urgent work in the village I could not stay in our convent in Patna waiting for Sandra, and I was not certain of the date of her arrival. So I requested the person in charge to inform me in the village as soon as Sandra should arrive in Patna. Not hearing from Patna for a few days I went to the convent to inquire about my friend. My heart broke when I discovered that Sandra had come, waited for me and gone away angry and sad. Somehow no one succeeded in informing me. Angry and upset I cried, and did not know what to do to handle my emotional upheaval. All of a sudden I felt an urge to go to my village. As I entered her hut Maiya noticed my red, tearful eyes. She did not ask why, but gave me water to wash my face and feet, spread an old rag (her sleeping mat) on the mud floor and motioned to me to lie down and rest. I held her close to me, cried and told her why I was pained. Maiya too cried in compassion and concern. She wiped my face with her soiled, torn saree, just as a mother would do, and sat beside me, running her hand freely over my head as I fell asleep in the comforting presence of my visible Christ of that moment. When I woke up my Maiya was still sitting by me with a plate of rice and two green chillis for me to have my lunch. Solidarity with the poor may begin in such relationships, and lead us together with them to the cross and to death and to the resurrection. It does lead us to build communities based on the realities of the Kingdom, mercy and justice and fellowship. Christ, the man who loved, was a community builder because He was an upbuilder of broken persons.

I have no way of knowing and experiencing love and trust except in giving and receiving trust and love in my day-to-day living. If I call God, my Father with love and fondness and want to share His love with others, it is only because many have loved me so unconditionally; many have helped me 'remain in His love'. My Baba in the village looked 80 years though he was only 55 years old. His physical frame was consumed by poverty and struggle for survival. But in his heart he carried the values of the

Kingdom of God. An hour before he died — and he died for lack of food and medical care — Baba asked for me, his adopted daughter, and for a drink of water from my hands. I was not in the village at the time. My Baba died that night, and a part of me died with him: not the death that destroys, but the death that leads to Life in its fullness, because we have stood together in love and concern in the struggle for a better tomorrow. I wept for him bitterly, and I miss him. But now I can sincerely say that when my own precious father will be taken away from me, I shall be able to face that moment of parting with courage and hope because of what my Baba taught me by his life and death. Once my Baba said to me, "Betti, your God must be a very kind God." Yes; and today I want to tell Baba that he has helped me to see this kind God of mine more closely.

And now I watch helplessly the slow death of my Maiya who has a malignant liver disease due to severe anaemia. Now she is confirmed that for her life means pain, struggle and an early death, and nothing more. How could she believe in anything else? What am I to communicate to her, and how? Isn't her slow death directly linked to the exploitative socio-economic structures which are contrived and maintained by the rich and the powerful for their own selfish interests? To have faith in Christ is to want and to work to change this inhuman unreality, and create an alternative order, warm and gentle and strong like life. The emaciated body and bloated belly of my Maiya cries out for justice. Her cry is but the sign and summation of the groanings of millions upon millions of the deprived and the humiliated. My prayer is within this collective, anguished, hopeful cry, for I cannot ignore my relatedness to each of my people. I believe that when we allow agonizing human experiences to touch us, we cannot but see God in human struggles.

The inner freedom and strength to keep moving with the poor come from a deep experience of Christ as a person who is concerned with and involved in the world of today; and from my experience of acceptance by the poor; from my agonies, doubts and failures seen in the context of His cross; and from the joy of having a vision and a dream and a hope which I share with my friends and the village folk. As days go by in my journey with the poor, I have no compulsions to *talk about*

Jesus, or the church, or to defend them. I know I can best proclaim the kingdom and make the reality of Jesus present by becoming a leaven in broken, dehumanised situations. A leaven quietly transforming the situation into Kingdom communities of mercy and justice and joy. I do not see the possibility of a genuine christian spirituality without taking risks in faith for the liberation of our people. Today the cross means a lot to me because what happened to Jesus centuries ago is happening now to millions of my brothers and sisters who work hard every day and every day go hungry to bed, who are despised and deprived for their birth, who are cheated and abused because they are defenceless, and whose children seldom live to see adulthood. I see the Mother of sorrows in women like Sumitra, my neighbour, who gave birth to nine sons and all nine died when they were small and who clings, as I write this, to the dead body of her last little one snatched away from her by lack of food and of medical care. I see the Crucified Jesus in Chunnu Manjhi, a bonded laborer and tuberculosis patient who has been working for years to pay off Rs 300 which he borrowed from the landlord for his mother's funeral. But I also see the hope of Resurrection within the very hopelessness of the village poor, nailed to the harsh realities of life. The relentless tenacity of human determination is very visible in people like Maiya who, in spite of acute deprivation, can still smile and sing and believe that 'all shall be well'.

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A Companion on the Way

"As the heavens are high above the earth
so great is his steadfast love for us." (Ps 103:11)

This is the first psalm verse that registered itself on my memory. As a child I heard it in our village church. I was deeply impressed by this wide and great love, high as the heaven, and stretching from one corner of the earth to the other. If God loves us so much, how could we refuse to respond?

Some years later when at school I read for the first time the Gospel of John at a stretch. I was profoundly touched by the life it reveals—the life of Jesus with the people, with his followers and his friends. I discovered Jesus alive. In the Gospel we hear how Jesus walks along the Jordan, meets John the Baptizer, and his disciples. We feel how fascinated they are by him, curious to know who he is, quietly following him. He senses it, turns around, addresses them, invites them to "Come and see". They came and saw, and stayed a day with him. The invitation to come and see is repeated today; it is extended to everyone everywhere. Jesus meets each one just as each one is, as an individual person, calling each one in his/her peculiar, particular situation.

Also by the end of the Gospel we hear the touching conversation between Jesus and Peter. "Do you love me?" Peter answers three times, "Yes, I love you". He must have had tears in his eyes when finally he said, "You know everything, you know that I love you".

Life itself is a call to love. Both life and love are gifts. We are born into life without our own choice for it, without being asked. We are called to live, and we gradually choose life.

Faith too is a call and gift; a grace gratuitously bestowed. Freely called to believe we gradually choose faith as our way of life. And faith is the experience that God is there, giving to life

meaning, a direction, and a goal — a life beyond our immediate, direct world, a reality beyond this visible. "As if he saw the invisible" Moses took charge and received strength to set out with the people of the Exodus. Faith is the experience that God leads us and guides us, that we are in his hands. He strengthens us with his presence.

The call to believe, to come and see Jesus, to stay with him and love him and walk with him, comes through the Scriptures. The Emmaus story reflects our own situation, our feelings, our experience. Like the disciples, we follow Jesus: we hope that he would bring about liberation and justice. But then all ends in death, destruction, darkness. We see the greed and brutality of the Gulf war, its murderous devastation, communal riots in India, war of Blacks against Blacks in South Africa . . . and we ask Where is God? Why does God allow such evil and human madness? It is 'mad' as it is 'mutually assured destruction'. And where is Jesus' promise of peace, and love and justice?

Disappointed, distressed, without an answer, we think of giving up, of being resigned, of walking away. And then again we meet him on the way...

- in a companion whose words of faith, hope and enthusiasm touch our hearts;
- in a stranger who shares his bread and something of his life with us;
- in gestures of sharing which we experience with people, especially the poor, who help whenever someone is in need. Through them the call comes, and a warmth gathers up in our hearts, and discoveries surprise us.

Growing in faith gradually becomes a call to life in faith, to commitment in service with people. A time came when I felt the call for me too. "Come and see, come, follow me." It was a call, but I did not know for what concrete form of life. How was I to know it? Brother Roger Schutz too poses the question and seeks to help towards an answer. "What is the sign by which you can recognize that you have met Christ? If you are irresistibly urged to leave fond realities behind and give yourself without knowing where the way may be leading you, you have met him, if in spite of you closing your ears, his word, "Come, follow" still resounds within you".

After a long struggle in prayer, in discussion with friends, the decision came like a flash of lightning. I was caught. Suddenly I knew which way to choose. A choice which would mean leaving behind my family, my friends, my homeland. It would mean heart-breaking separations. "We can say 'Yes' under tears". And I did say 'yes'.

Meeting Jesus in his call and in peoples and events made my faith ever simpler, clearer and more direct. During some weeks of relief work in Bihar we went from village to village. Walking through the fields became a vivid experience of walking with Him and looking at Him. Thus my personal call developed over the years into social commitment. Through our work with the poor, our solidarity with them grew into a commitment for justice. I discovered that "Yahweh is our justice" (Jr 23:6; 33:16). And I saw how radically and consistently Jesus lived this priority for justice and humanness. He lived it, and was killed for it. To follow him means to stand for justice, to pursue human needs and human dignity in the first place. "Seek first the Kingdom and its justice."

Meeting Jesus in the Eucharist enhances and quickens this commitment. For in this sacrament, justice and love, humanness and community are symbolised and expressed, in the sharing of bread, food, life and concern for one another. This then continues into our daily life. It is in my concern for my patients that I search for Jesus and meet him. Their faces reveal Christ to me. Brother Roger again: "To celebrate and to live, we need faces rather than words. They share with us friendship, and friendship is the face of Christ. Nothing is more beautiful than a face which has become transparent through the struggle of life. There are only beautiful faces, either sad ones or radiant ones."

I see before me:

- the face of the old catechist who comes each Sunday to pray with our patients in the hospital;
- the face of the old tribal man, who though nearing his death always smiled and never complained;
- the face of the paralysed boy, who as soon as his pain abates a little, laughs again;
- the face of the emaciated little boy, now eating and gaining weight, — all eyes and smiles when he visits us.

As years passed, faith and prayer all became less explicit. But a friend's question still rings in my ears: "What gives you the strength to live here in this isolation with such happiness?" The answer is that ultimately it is God that called me, and still calls; It is him I meet more and more in people. The former hours of meditation and prayer are now moments of concentration and re-creation, though I still long for those long hours of prayer! But now there is more of a search for God. God seems to be farther away now than then, than twenty years ago. He is less tangible.

During some months of illness, I very consciously wanted to make the painful experience a real encounter with God, an offering of myself, a surrender into his hands. The wish was more an act of the will than a felt experience. Finally I was overwhelmed by the story of the man who saw himself in a dream, walking along the seashore with God, watching his own and God's footprints in the sand. They were there, the footprints, except in times of distress when he found the footprints of one person only. Was he left alone, forsaken by God? But he perceived that the footprints were God's as God carried the man on his shoulder in times of great anguish and pain.

But finally faith becomes the question: What or who sustains us in life? A question shared with many around us. All of us are searching, and already in this common search we are sustaining one another. Answers and reflections of people around us give some light:

- the intellectual who sees and feels the Divine beyond all daily trifles;
- the village woman, union leader, who is committed to the cause of women and their struggles, finds strength in the concern of people for one another;
- the nurse who affirms that service to people is service to God;
- an old friend of 84 years who writes: "I hope to grow spiritually during this time of Lent";
- a child that bucks up, "I am not afraid, God is with me always."
- patients who accept their illness and give us a lesson in life and hope and faith;
- a man of action become completely invalid yet inspiring us by his faith and sense of humour;
- a paralysed boy who sings and paints and makes paper flowers for the Temple festival;

- a young cancer patient become a shadow of his former self who smiles and writes messages;
- the woman: the mother who is present to her children and answers with great patience the many questions, the innumerable Why's, which the children pose;
- the sister, daughter or wife of a dependent sick person, giving their own life in complete dedication.

Their way of living reveals their faith and defines the features of Jesus.

All these people and many more are before my eyes, are in my mind, as we celebrate the Eucharist in our community of friends, sitting around a table with bread and wine, listening, today, to the message of the Good Shepherd, the one who shows the way.

His way is justice, peace and love. Walking this way brings us into the midst of the people and their struggle for life. It is there that our faith grows, and gives meaning to our own life. A life of faith is what Jesus exemplifies. For me Jesus is a friend, a companion on the way, someone who questions and challenges us, and sustains us through his invisible presence in people and the events of everyday life.

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Hildegard Sina

The Bush - Burning but not Consumed

Suffering is common and inevitable in human life. When we view television, read news papers, listen to radio, take a walk, everywhere suffering is projected. Pain seems to be universal and inevitable. Why should this be so? And why should pain overtake me too? I am recalling the most tragic experience of my life: the fire accident at the TISCO anniversary celebrations two years ago. The event is still burning in my mind; it has burned itself deep into my memory. Any experience which touches the core of one's being will last for life and change one profoundly. I realize that this experience links up almost naturally and spontaneously with the most tragic event in human history, namely, the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

The accident was so sudden, so unsuspected, that I could hardly believe that I was going through it in the prime of my youth. At a pleasant moment, while enjoying a very good programme, fire broke out, the shamiana was burning down, and all of us in the V. I. P. gallery were engulfed in the flames. Very few escaped unhurt; most of us fought with the fire; and some 59 died including the sister who was my companion. I was one of those who struggled out of death and survived.

I had an immense desire to live. The moment I knew the fire was consuming me, I uttered a cry, "O God, I want to live, I am not ready to die now!" And God did not let me die, whereas my companion said goodbye to this world. I had the will to live. The agony was great, but the hope of recovery kept me strong. The care of the doctors and nurses, and of my sisters, and the prayers of many friends kept my spirits high. I felt such a tremendous power to endure the pain that seeing me so cheerful people admired my courage. My sisters and relatives who came to see me made me feel that I was wanted and loved, and that I must live for their sake. But the sight in the hospital was

heart-splitting: all around me was suffering and pain, people crying and their dear ones trying in vain to comfort them.

Taste of death

Beautiful talks and books on suffering are one thing, the actual experience of suffering is another. Till that accident I could feel for people who suffered anguish, for those who set fire to themselves, or were set on fire by others — something so common nowadays in our country and our queer culture. But from that day and that moment I feel very close to these people. Did God permit me to experience the suffering and kept me alive so that I should identify myself with all who suffer, especially the women who are burnt to death? I really had a taste of death. I was trying to escape from the flames along with others. But we were too many and the exit was too narrow. There were shouts and yells and cries. Calling out to one another and calling for help was useless. And suddenly there was a stampede. And in the twinkling of an eye everything went dark. Fume and smoke enveloped us. I too fell over. And in a moment I became aware of tongues of flames licking me. The smoke was stifling; I closed my eyes. The shamiana was falling on us bit by bit of fire. The fire was eating into me, and the few seconds seemed like ages. It had reached from feet to thighs, and I knew I was nearing death. I felt terribly suffocated and struggled for breath. My only anxious thought at the moment was, if I was going to die so soon without having really lived? I had no hope of survival. The thought of my dear ones flashed across my mind. It was cruel separation. I lost consciousness. When I came to myself again I found myself in the hospital.

Then started the treatment: the painful dressings, the injections, the skin graftings, anaesthesias; the glucose and blood bottles emptying into my body; that red-hot fever: all that was a death experience. My whole body was a big wound: made by fire and made by men in the process of skin graftings. Gradually some patients started moving in the ward. Seeing them I grew anxious: When will my turn come? When some with minor burns got discharged from the hospital my feelings were ambivalent: I was glad to see them well and go home, but sad to see myself confined to bed like a log of wood. All that my dear ones from home could do was to support me with a word of encouragement and a message that I had to live.

Three months and a half in the hospital, and I had had and seen enough suffering. Then, I was taken home; but there I was not pleasant either. The hope of recovery that had sustained me in the hospital seemed to give away to despair. Questions kept churning in my mind: Why did God let this happen to me? What have I done to deserve so severe a punishment? Why are so many young and innocent people thus disfigured? Some lost their beloved wives, others their husbands, others their only child, or children lost both their parents. Where is God's care and compassion? Where is the so called providence! Jesus assured, he had come so that we might have life in abundance. Still that cruel killer fire had done the worst to me! Two years have rolled by. I still sit and think back and wonder at the struggle I had with death. Since I chose life I had to accept so much misery and pain. Did these have any real meaning? Any fresh depths?

A journey with the suffering servant

As I was convalescing the physical pain mitigated day by day, but I had mental agony. An immense anxiety took hold of me. I realized I was broken-hearted. I was impatient over the slow and gradual improvement, and I felt a fragmentation within myself. Every moment I was asking God to take away this bitter cup from me. God seemed to be an avenger, punishing me so cruelly. I kept questioning and found no answer. Consoling words from friends, letters of sympathy, a bit of counselling – all went in vain. One moment I saw that suffering was part of life, it was inevitable, so many in the world were suffering without any fault of their own, and so do I. The next moment I would revolt again, and fall into depression.

I was 33 when the tragedy hit me. My legs and arms and body and part of my head had severe burns. I had just completed my theological studies in Vidya Jyoti and was to begin work for my Congregation. But now I was unable to function normally. And now, to add insult to injury my old mother, my only treasure in this world, passed away. Sorrow upon sorrow. And yet somewhere deep within me I had a flicker of truth that Jesus too was a man of sorrows. For thirty years he quietly observed the misery of his people: the oppression, the injustices meted out to the poor, the marginalisation of women, people's selfishness and mutual hatred. All this surely gave him great anguish. But a time

came when he could bear it no longer. The rest of his life he spent in working for the eradication of such inhuman ways, challenging oppressive structures, identifying himself with the miserable and wretched of the earth. He lived for the people and was persecuted, mocked, ill-treated and taken for a criminal. Even his relatives misunderstood him. His cup of suffering was so full, so bitter that he pleaded with God that it be taken away. He was led like a lamb to slaughter. He cried to God questioning why He had forsaken him.

I read and reread the book of Job too. Job fails to understand his sufferings and God's ways. He curses the day of his birth, and asks God to justify himself. From his friends he expected understanding and sympathy, but received only theological explanations which contradicted his own experience. His desperate appeals to God culminate in a dialogue. In the end Job could transcend himself, pass beyond the bounds of human thought, and glimpse the realm of God's mystery. He gains a new vision of himself and of God. Job then repents and takes back his rash words. I felt close to Job. He too had hung between life and death, and struggled between hope and despair. In his suffering he travelled all alone. Even his wife refused to stand by him. But God walked with him all the while and at times carried him gently in his hands.

Blessing in disguise?

Job's story ends well. His sufferings led to greater blessings. But from me only sacrifices are demanded. I should have been working for the Congregation, taking responsibilities and risks, facing greater challenges. All I can do now is to rest and recuperate, and fall to thinking of the past, and to looking at the future with anxiety; I am not really living the present. Someone has said, "I know not what my future holds but I do know who holds it." This is beautiful and true, but not easy to live out. I still have to struggle to let God hold my future.

My faith is at challenge. I see around me so many handicapped people: the blind deprived of sight and unable to admire and enjoy the beauty of God's creation; the lame who cannot move around freely; the deaf, the dumb, the crippled; the millions who suffer from incurable or fatal diseases. Don't they suffer and yet live? Don't they really want to continue living? In never-ending

pain and agony yet accepting everything cheerfully? Where do they have their hold? Can it be that it is God they are holding on? That they have such faith in Him that they believe that our present sufferings are nothing in comparison to the glory yet to be revealed! It must be that. The Lord is my shepherd, and there is nothing I shall want. If the Lord is for us who can be against? One of my doctors said to me: "Sister, we think of God when we are suffering; when we are well and happy we scarcely think of Him" As some poet sang, as night shows us the stars, so sorrow shows us the truth. True. When things go well I easily forget to say a 'Thank You' to God. But in trouble I keep asking the Lord to deliver me. But that also is the time I am consciously close to God, and realize that God carries me gently in his arms. Yes, God has been very close to me during those moments of intense agony, those moments of wrestling with God. Had God stayed away from me I could not have had the courage and the strength to go through the ordeal of so many skin graftings, and surgical operations, and to face the prospects of living with a deformed body. There were moments when I felt God had left me and gone away: like the occasion when the doctors had to poke all over my arms some 15 to 16 times in search of a vein for the transfusion of blood. I was angry and impatient, and cried out to my brother, asking him loudly, "Where is this God, can't He see my struggle?". My brother only answered with a compassionate look and a gentle touch. That was God's touch. He was near.

John F. Kennedy wrote¹⁹ after an illness: "It is better by far to be well. But if illness strikes, though we may grumble at first about the long days, away from our normal work and routine, if we recognize the potential opportunities those long days make possible, we will realise that our disability whatever its pains and comforts, may in some ways have been a blessing in disguise." Victor E. Frankl says in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*: "He who has a WHY to live can bear with almost any HOW." Having gone through the paschal mystery in my own life, having been cared for and loved and served so tenderly by so many, I must say I have a WHY to live. Therefore, disabled and disfigured though I be, I can have the inner strength to live with this tragic HOW.

Have I not tasted death and passed from death to life? Is

that not an experience of God who calls into being what is not and raises the dead? Has not Pramila been recreated by him who gave new life to Mary of Magdala, to the Woman from Samaria, to the bent Woman whom Luke remembers, to the Woman with a haemorrhage, and to Zachaeus and Nicodemus and to all those who were open to the gift of God. I wish to be open to the gift of life, and to make my life an offering to God. I spent four years acquiring theoretical knowledge on subjects like evil and suffering and God's ways. But now I am really experiencing these realities. In my flesh I am living the mystery of God's unfathomable ways, the mystery of the crucified Son of Man. I always knew that God is compassionate and his touch is healing. I know now that his touch has in it at times a touch of fire.

I had hoped for total healing at least by the end of the second year of pain. But it looks as if God has other thoughts. I have been living through this contradiction between my experience of suffering and the crude ways of God in sifting me. But ultimately faith overtakes. The knowledge of God I have is not adequate. It is limited. It is coloured by my prejudices and self-interest. This little knowledge joins Job in asking, "Have I not wept for all whose life is hard, and felt pity for the penniless? I hoped for happiness, but sorrow came." My suffering joins Jesus' agony and keeps asking, "My God, why have you deserted me?" When I rebel, I feel restless, and the God of wisdom and compassion seems to be asking me, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Were you there...?" I have no answer. I sit in wonder, and bow before the Almighty. And I wait. I know the night will pass. The day will break. So I do wait.

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Pramila

Search and Fidelity

Search

I was a 'good' and honest seminarian: very pious; and even inflicting on myself acts of penance and saying prayers of God; giving up reading of news papers and showing strict literal obedience to superiors. It was at this time that Vatican II came with its *aggiornamento*. My heart responded spontaneously to the new demands of Vatican II. In 1968-69, three of us seminarians took the initiative to introduce some changes in seminary life according to the decree on 'Priestly Ministry and life'. Fr. Dominic OCD., the Rector, supported this move of ours. It was a landmark in my life. I said good-bye to the totally ritualistic way of religious life. This small start was propelled further by an AICUF camp, led by Samuel Rayan S.J, held at St. Albert's College, Ernakulam. The camp made a lasting impression on me, especially as regards the great contribution made by women in society and the positive approach to sex and women. With all enthusiasm and good-will, I moved forward. I was ordained priest on December 21, 1970.

As assistant pastor of Charumood, I got involved with much interest and energy in the life of the people. The people with whom I was working were christian converts from scheduled castes and tribes. They were poor and had been badly exploited and oppressed for centuries by the people of the upper-class communities. The fact of their poverty, landlessness, homelessness, lack of toilet facilities etc. forced me to plunge into social action. Another group to whom my priestly ministry extended was the traditional fisherfolk — a culturally oppressed, economically exploited and socially unrecognized sector of society. A small-saving scheme, a nursery, tailoring centres, construction of low-cost houses, provision of latrines and wells, granite and latrite stone programme, a milk society were some of the activities I busied myself with. The basis

of all this involvement was my regular house-visiting and close contact with the people.

In the first seven years of my ministry, my aim was to create a christian community after 'the holy family'. I spared no effort to live this commitment. Gradually the life and struggle of the people challenged me to rethink these activities. A seminar on 'Liturgical Renewal' in the National, Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical centre, Bangalore and a 'Social Awareness and Leadership Training' camp (SALT camp) for the youth guided by a Jesuit team led me to question my pastoral vision. It opened up new dimension of societal problems and new ways of looking at them. Honestly, I was going through a process. My inspiration and the theological backing were the Bible and Vatican II, the Encyclicals and statements of the various episcopal conferences including our CBCI. This directed me to a new way of action with the people, and to new interest in theological reflection at the grass-root level. It was based on the principle: How we see a problem determines how we respond to it. This critical societal understanding helped me to realize that activities like thrift-promotion, self-employment, free service, etc. have their limitations and are not basically able to solve the problems of the present day society.

The three month course on 'Community Development Organisation' at the ISI, Bangalore, gave me greater clarity, and some tools to analyse society in a more scientific manner. They helped me look at human problems in a different way. In the new approach "deeper structural issues are explored, causal linkages examined, key factors identified, long-term trends traced...It is an effort to see the wider picture and to initiate action that affects more profound social change. This 'seeing a wider picture' is the result of social analysis. As a tool of pastoral action, social analysis is an integral part of the ministry for social justice" (Joe Holland and Peter Henriot's *Social Analysis*, page, 3).

The conflict within me was intense. The traditional seemed to be meaningless and ineffective. The new was not yet clear. Search was my basic attitude. My friend-priests were an immense encouragement and boost to me. Through regular meetings, sharing and working together, we have formed ourselves into a team which calls itself 'forum for renewal of christian solidarity,

This search led some of us to an attempt at forming a community with the people. The process was painful. Jesus' unfailing sensitiveness to the needs and problems of the people was an eye-opener and inspiration to us. Jesus who weeps with the widow bereft of her only son; who goes out of the way to change water into wine; who gets involved in time to calm the rough sea; who takes the initiative to feed the hungry multitude; who marches forward to face the authorities at Jerusalem on behalf of the people; who is literally broken up for others so that 'they may have life in abundance' (Jn.10:10) is our model. 'I am the good shepherd: I know my own and my own know me I lay down my life for my sheep'". (Jn.10:14-15) The saying of bishop Romero is inspiring: 'I am a shepherd who, with the people, has begun to learn a beautiful but difficult truth: our christian faith requires that we submerge ourselves in this world'.

Experiment

We spent much time with the people, discussing and sharing their problems. Sensitive to people's issues and persistent reflection and discussions, we started a life-together in a forest area, rented out by the government for three years for interim cultivation called 'Tangya Cultivation'. A hundred families came together, lived together, worked together, prayed together. We accepted each other with our limitations, settled our disagreements, shared everything according to each one's needs. We did this for three years. It was a wonderful experience. The voiceless people started to speak, the divided got united, and individualism was transformed into communion, 'I' changed into 'we'.

Although the people shared and lived together, we had to face many difficulties, especially in selling our agricultural products in the market, both from the big merchants and from the bureaucracy. Once the period of lease was over, we had to return to our own native villages. Indeed, the people did grow in this process of living together. But they again had to face the oppressive forces of society.

It was an attempt to merge the traditional and the new in the context of total religiosity, in the hope of creating islands of model communities of faith, love and service. On evaluating

the whole process, we realized that the dynamics operative in society were much deeper and more extensive than those of the village, and that change of society through change of small groups was a false dream. At the same time, we realized the value of fellowship and community life in the change-process.

Critical re-thinking on the Tangya-life-experience opened my eyes to the wider society beyond church boundaries. From 1980 on, most of the people with whom I was involved, were low caste or tribal, either hindus or converts to christianity, in Pathanamthitta district. The vast majority of them were agricultural workers. They worked land owned by middle class and upper caste people. The majority of these middle-class land owners belongs to high caste communities, Hindu and Syrian Christian. For centuries, the workers have been brutally dominated, oppressed and exploited by the land-owning class. Although many land-owners and a good number of the workers are Christians, caste and class discrimination against workers is rampant and human fellowship is restricted not only in society but even in church-worship. My understanding of Jesus as one who is predominantly interested in table-fellowship, questioned this situation. Jesus who is repeatedly accused of eating and drinking with tax-collectors and sinners (Lk. 7:33-35), and who invites to the banquet 'the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind' (Lk.14:13) stood as an open challenge to me in this particular situation.

Their economic condition is still appalling, I have seen people starving for days and days, even starving to death. A deeper study gave me to understand that the present day workers were not always landless; they were made landless through the expropriation of their land by the dominating class. Their dire poverty forced them to work for low wages for longer and heavier working-hours. The remnants of feudalism and its consequences prevented the workers from questioning these unjust practices. The gesture of benevolence shown by land owners on occasions like Christmas, Onam, Easter etc. helped to keep the workers ever mute and loyal to them. As a result, the workers were not at all aware of the causes of their depressed condition. This made them more apolitical. The dominating class had them in their firm grip.

This situation not merely challenged my traditional, pietistic, christian religiosity. It demanded a real, authentic religiousness where each one can affirm and live by his/her own worth. The more I got involved in the life and problems of the people, the more explicit did the meaning of my life become. My identification with and commitment to the people, and constant dialogue with them in the real life-situations compelled me to search into the real meaning of redemption, priestly ministry, faith and discipleship and the significance of Jesus.

This search could be articulated in varied ways and from different angles. I would like to mention here just two life-sharings: one, more in the organizational area; the other, more in the area of reinterpretation of traditional religious forms and cultural myths in the light of the Gospel.

Struggles

1. Naraganam is 10 kilometres north of Pathanamthitta town. In 1981, a Dalit catholic was beaten up and thrown down from his seat at the corner of a bench in a coffee shop, just because he sat with his cup of coffee on the same bench with a certain Kunjumon, of the middle class. Kunjumon's anger did not subside with that. He roared with rage. He banged another Dalit on the road, and smashed a third, a boy of 14, and threw him into the gutter.

Next Sunday when I went to Naraganam for Mass, they told me their story. They had innumerable stories to tell of atrocities committed against them over years. They were constantly made to feel helpless, and knew not how to react. Through a number of get-togethers and discussions held in groups of men, women, youth etc., the people came to the consensus that "if we organise ourselves, this can be stopped." These few meetings were not to the liking of high-caste people. They ruled: 'No blacks may be seen on the road after 6 p.m.' The people decided to have a protest march and a public meeting in front of Kunjumon's house. The police sided with the rich man. Sanction of a microphone was denied to the people. The circle inspector threatened to beat up and imprison the people if they dared to demonstrate.

Through a sharing process it was decided that 14 people

would start the demonstration, come what may. The heavy rain did not stop us. We marched forward. Others joined the demonstration one by one. There were 300 when we reached the venue. The meeting was held, undisturbed. It concluded with the words of an illiterate Dalit woman, Chellamani by name. She said: "No more this...this, no more". It was an intense and disturbing warning to the high-caste.

It was a start. An independent Agricultural Workers Union was formed to fight for their rights. They marched forward through a process of various involvements and struggles for better wages, for respect of persons, both men and women, for a more decent way of life etc. The people silenced for ages, began to speak, they began to see they had to depend on themselves to liberate themselves. The small local struggles did not end there. The move was from the anecdotal to the analytical; from issues to explanations of how they are linked to the larger system, where "facts and issues are no longer regarded as isolated problems. Rather, they are perceived as interrelated parts of a whole" (*Social Analysis*—page 11). This move was really political. We joined hands with the Kerala State Agricultural Workers Federation. The growing complexity of society as well as its ever-changing character made analysis difficult. Being not value-free, it inevitably provoked controversy. It always had some link to some ideological position — at least implicitly. Because 'the claim to have no ideology is itself an ideological position'. This is because the issue at stake is not the moral goodness of the individual person living within the system; rather, it is the system itself that is called into question.

2. The other example is from Kumbalampoika. This is a parish with 85% Dalit Christians and 15% Syrian Christians. This 15% had been ruling the church for generations. Rev M.J. Joseph's hardwork in the parish paved the way for the Dalits to come into the parish committee. This move was not palatable to the minority. Upper class Christians, having made pre-arrangements with the police, questioned this move of Rev. M.J. Joseph. The committee meeting was held in the church. With no provocation whatever, the police entered the church and beat the poor people, both men and women, under the pretext of keeping 'law and order', and drove the Dalits out of the church. Rev. Joseph

also got out of the 'church' in solidarity with the poor People — the real church.

The next Sunday, to the dismay of all, with police protection, mass was offered for the high caste christians while Dalit christians were not allowed to enter the church. The Dalit Christians, therefore, gathered in the street for their celebration. I too had the privilege of joining them. It was a moving experience. The 23 men and women, literally broken like bread for a new society, were the real celebrants of that liturgy. This event raises new questions, provides new insights and inspires new responses. If inside the church faith was dead, I could see faith alive in the street. I recalled how Jesus himself was thrown out of the synagogue because he sided with the outcaste (widow and leper of the rejected places: Zarephath and Syria) in proclaiming the good news to the poor (Lk. 4:16-30). The people, who joined hands in determination and solidarity and were ready to be broken for a society where love and justice would embrace each other and where brotherhood prevail: they were my strength and my true teacher. This process of reinterpretation of faith-myths, more in line with the life of the poor, was becoming more and more meaningful; and at the same time, controversial, and full of risk.

The plunge

Then in 1984, I was transferred to a traditional parish, Padppakkara with a population of over 6512: 70% of them were fisherfolk. The parish was going through a crisis as my predecessor had been subjected to physical violence in the parish for his involvements with the fishing community. This situation was an added reason for me to make an objective and elaborate survey of the place, before launching any plan of action. I visited homes; contacted the people; took note of salient features such as various occupations, land-ownership patterns, housing facilities, available media-communication, religious practices etc.

In the light of this survey, a threefold action-programme was chartered through a long process of discussions and evaluation. The three strands were:

1. Social service activities: There was a whole lot of people's participation. Community health programme, small saving scheme,

low-cost housing project, construction of latrines and digging of wells were a few of the activities. All this was meant as an entry point to the life of the people; and it did work well.

2. Conscientisation activities: The overall emphasis of all social service activities was on the creation of new levels of awareness that would enable people's mobilisation for change. This implied real change in the age-old, pietistic, fundamentalist and communalist catholic traditions. The idea was to make the Faith relevant, the Bible meaningful and Religion all-embracing. The means was a series of study-reflection programmes like seminars, discussion-forums, Bible conventions etc.

Together with it went the formation of a militant group of youth who would take the problems of traditional fisherfolk seriously. This team spent a lot of time trying to awaken and build up the fishing community. How water-pollution affects the fishing sector was well high-lighted by this group. A small library too was initiated, seeing its vital role in the process of awareness-building. The response was the next step.

3. Unionisation activities: The traditional fisherfolk, under the leadership of the Kerala Independent Fishermen Federation, were agitating for an issue of life and death import — the conservation of fish resources. The agitation was at its peak. It was the historic moment when I had to express my solidarity with the fisherfolk.

My faith in Jesus and in his People led me to join the struggle. In front of the Collectorate in Kollam, I undertook hunger-strike for eleven days. This expression of solidarity quickened my commitment to identify myself with the cause of the oppressed and marginalised fisherfolk. I can never forget the day, June 21st 1985 — the eleventh day of my hungerstrike — when I was arrested and hospitalised by the police. It was a rare opportunity to suffer and be broken for the people.

The impact of this experience in my life was intense. The event also led, naturally, to a kind of polarisation of the parish. One is bound to take sides. My option to be with the poor

fisherfolk and its cost were becoming clearer. My faith in a God who reveals himself in history and pitches his tent in the midst of the poor and the oppressed was becoming an intensely lived experience. Involvement in People's struggles demands that we search for a new spirituality capable of sustaining us throughout our combat for a more just society.

This deeper insertion into the wider movement was inevitably marked by the 'cross', and the cross was forged by varied groups of people. The political people, who are basically for the status quo, tried to label me a 'communist' and atheist. The well-to-do of the parish looked at me with suspicion. They saw my position as detrimental to their class-interests. There were conscious efforts from the part of the church authority to marginalise me. Their most tactical approach was not to give me an official assignment which was and is due to me in justice, once I was back in the diocese after my two-months' leave, duly sanctioned and permitted by my bishop in 1987.

Threshing

I had no place to go. The diocesan presbyterium forgot me and my 17 years of ministry. The bishop ignored me. My basic right for maintenance was violated. The experience was painful. My elder brother opened his arms and gave me a warm welcome. When I felt deserted, the love and concern of the poor people and of my friends sustained me.

This existential situation challenged me to continue seriously the search for a new spirituality of struggle and involvement, and for a deeper understanding of the life of Jesus and for new forms of ministry. My two years of study and reflection at Boston College, U. S. A. are proving helpful. The magazine — Organ for Radical Action (ORA) — stands as an expression of this search. This blending of vision and mission has been an energising factor all through my life. Today I dream of bringing to light reflections on people's life and involvements and on my option for a system-transforming, prophetic church (community) where justice and brotherhood/sisterhood of the human and the universal fatherhood of God are affirmed and lived.

In short, joining the struggles of the fisherfolk and agricultural workers and sharing in reflections on them by the people and friends and theologians have given me fresh insights into the emerging community (church) of the Poor. It stimulates me to celebrate and deepen the faith incarnate in the agonizing struggles of the people. All this is helpful in the process of mapping out the specific form of Liberation Theology/Christology for Kerala. My basic attitude at this stage of my life is one of search and fidelity.

Aloysius D. Fernandez

Meditations on the "I am" Sayings of Jesus

(These are disturbing pieces, showing how we, mortals respond to the ever mysterious words of life and light. Their ever embracing force and our inability to grasp are at the core of these random riddles of poetic thoughts)

I am the Way.... John 14:5

You are the way, the winding way,
With no mark, no guide,
Demanding fresh trekking every time.
The long long way, unending
The way which leads to the cross.

You who tread Galilee and Golgotha
I dance with joy while on this way
Through valleys and mountains
Through the war front where
Bombs are strewn like flowers.
You are the way which leads to desert
Where nothing lives, only illusions
But my feet have bells.

The way which leads to truth and encounters
Where I dare to enter alone,
Where betrayal is the norm
But it only leads me to freedom.

You are the way
Where death is only a milestone,
The way which leads to the cross;
Then it is a flight to eternity,

Susy Nellithanam

I am the Way.... John 14:5

I am the way,
The way to what?
The narrow path
Lonely and strewn with stones
Winding round
Insurmountable barriers
Drawing away
Into solitary places
Where no one dares follow.
The way of bigotry
The way of hatred
The way of petty superiority
The way of arrogance
The way of self interest
Not the way of the people

Is this what you meant?
How can it be?
And yet you spoke
Of the other way
That was broad
And led to destruction
Has it never struck
Your all pervading wisdom
That we are mortals
Bound by time
By circumstances
By situations
To travel
Pre-ordained paths?
The freedom of choice
Is denied us
And yet we continue
To struggle, to stumble
To fall, to crawl
Striving to reach
The end of the way
Despair, death.
I am the way

I am the Door?.... John 10:9

You are the door to the new world
Inviting me to take a flight
To the impossible, beyond limits
The door to love and laughter.

You open new horizons
Where I write sagas of freedom,
A door which provides wings
For a flight and to dream
A fleeting door indeed
Never a docile wooden piece.

You are the door to suffering
To tribulations
To solitary confinements
The door which leads to encounters, trials
To the cross, my destiny.

Susy Nellithanam

I am the Door.... John 10:9

I am the door.
And doors are set in walls
And walls are barriers.
Are you a door which opens
Outward to freedom
Or inward to destruction?
Unlock the door
Break down the walls
Let there be no barriers
Let the Kingdom of God
Be open to all.
There should never have been doors
Even you should not be a door
Because the door stands between
God and his people
Doors of hatred and prejudice
Of exploitation
Of suppression
Lock us in, lock us out
Confine us body and soul
Separating
Parting
Discriminating
Judging.
Are we not all
Children of one Father?
Why then did you say
I am the door?

Ranjit

I am the Good Shepherd.... John 10:11

The cosmic Christ, my shepherd
Wandering in rocky places and deserts
In search of pastures, green meadows,
The shepherd who prepares my table with enemies,
Who teaches me to say, "Father forgive them".
The shepherd for lion, lamb, wolf and the deer.

The shepherd preparing me
To face the worst betrayal;
He leads me through dark alleys,
Where truth is held captive, to the cross
His wooden staff is my comfort
My cup runs over with love
A new song on my lips.

I thirst for you eternal shepherd
I thirst for you as a hind
Longing for the running stream.

Susy Nellithanam

I am the Good Shepherd.... John 10:11

I am the good shepherd
Guarding my sheep
Guarding my flock
Protecting
What belongs to me
I will not share it
I will not let others intrude
I will not let
The wolf eat my sheep
I will not let the thief
Steal away my sheep
I will go in search
Of the lost sheep
The last sheep.

Love, care, concern, shelter,
Only for those who belong
Those who belong to my community
To my caste to my class
To my church to my father
I am the good shepherd
Unless you belong to me
I will not
Care for you

Ranjit

I am the Light of the World.... John 8:12

You are the sun I revolve around;
You create darkness, light, shadows
And smile from behind.
You are the light
Reaching the broken beings
Entering the wretched terrain
Like a whirl wind.

You, light of light
Delete the debate between light and darkness.
You slash into my depths
Like a diamond dagger
Constantly pushing me to dialogues
With shadows and darkness
So that truth is no more
Buried in darkness.

You are the light urging
Darkness to rage against
Murder, disappearance;
To keep her eyes wide open
While burning bodies in petrol.
You have taken away the void
Between light and darkness
I see the wailing of the victims
Even in darkness because of you.

Light, travelling to and fro
Through ages, I see you
The red radiant sun at the cross
I see the light in your eyes.

I am the Light of the World.... John 14:5

In the darkness of injustice
Oppression, inequality and bondage
You came as the promised light
To lead men to a new life
Of brightness
But the gloom has deepened
And in the shadow of light
The darkness is
Even more frightening
Sometimes I wonder
If it would not have been better if
We never saw the light
For then we would not see
The suffering, the agony, the pain
We would only hear
Ghostly voices crying
In the darkness
Huddled in dark corners
Wrapped in the anonymity
Of the black night.

Your light has not increased
The area of brightness
Your light has not drawn
People together
Your light has only brought
Division and strife.
I am the light of the world
Do we need such a light?

I am the Bread of Life.... John 6:48

I am the bread of life.....
 Yes, you soak me in life
 As I rage against torture
 Of aliens – prisoners, prostitutes.
 They wait outside;
 Their voice is like the roaring sea
 Impatient to devour
 The lies about life.

You are the bread blossoming in me
 At the point of anger,
 Infusing in me hope
 Against the salt of my tears
 Sustaining my fragile frame
 Battered by compromises.⁵
 You are the bread I consume
 When I cling to truth in my prison cell
 Counting the steps towards death;
 The bread I relish when they press
 Red hot iron, cigarette butts, nails;
 The bread I long for
 When the tunnel of trials seems endless.

You are the bread of life
 Which pushes me into the raging multitudes,
 Leads me to the cross, the ultimate truth
 Where my battered body embraces!
 Into communion with you.

Susy Nellithanam

I am the Bread of Life.... John 6:48

I am the bread of life
And people who partake of this bread
Will never again hunger....

Yet there is much hunger
People starving
Children crying
Girls winking
Mothers smothering
Men struggling
People gasping
Men and women selling themselves.
All for the sake of bread.

Why did you not
Change the stones into bread?
Why have you not satisfied
The hungry longings of so many people?
How can I believe
That you are a God of life?

All our trials and struggles
Are for the sake of bread....
The reason for our life and struggle.
And you said
I am the bread of life.

I am the True Vine.... John 15:1

I am the true vine
Rooted to the spot
Unable to move
Spreading out my branches
In an illusion of growth
With a welcome
To fruits yet to come

Watered, tended
Pruned, cared for,
Protected, nurtured.
And what happens?
The grapes are sour.

The question is
Whose garden?
Who is the gardener?
Who is the vine?

I am the Resurrection and the Life.... John 11:25

I am the resurrection
And the life
Death!
Life!
You said:
Unless a grain of wheat
Falls to the ground
And dies
It cannot
Bring forth life.
You also spoke
Of death
And the life to come after.

Life on earth
Is death
And this death
Cannot bring forth life
But it is not the same
Death and life
You spoke about.
Life here
Is a continual dying
A dying not because
Of a desire for death
But a dying because life
Is crushed, stifled, stamped out
By pain, by incomprehension.
Life without hope
Even of Death.
The process is not finished
Or completed with one stroke
That would be easy to accept.
No, this is a slow starvation
Of a million children
While the leaders fight
Over the spoils of war

This is a process of an inexorable crushing
Of the human spirit
In the name of religion
Profit, trade, development.
This is a slow annihilation
Of the multitudes who claim
Their rights
To live, to eat
To find shelter in dignity.
Darlings of a Father
This is the process
Of hallucinating
Under the influence
Of drugs, of alcohol, of false values;
Of a search to make sense
Of a meaningless life.

Is this the life you speak of resurrecting?
I am the resurrection and the life.

Ranjit

Break free, Jesus

Break free, Jesus,
From your entombment in the word.
The Word became flesh
And dwelt among men.

Your power to transform
Has become enshrined
In structures, institutions
Of the episcopal hierarchy.

Your power to liberate
Has been confiscated
By the elite in church and society
And is used to perpetuate
Oppression and exploitation.

Your power to confront
Unjust and evil situations
Has been confined
To empty talks
Discussions, conferences
And meaningless statements
Of compromise, devoid of content.

Break free, Jesus,
And show your face
In your commitment to people
The poor, the marginal, the oppressed.

Ranjit

Book Reviews

Anthropological Method and Attitudinal Change, Lorenzo Fernando, Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1990. pp. 127.

A scientific study of the human approach to faith education is the felt need of our time. This book, an extract of the doctoral thesis entitled *Anthropological Method in Indian Youth Catechesis in View of Attitudinal Change towards Religious Education*, is a profound and relevant exposition of the process of catechetical pedagogy among the youth especially in the Indian context. The well-grounded sociological interpretations, theological reflections along with catechetical implications, scientific verification of the hypothesis and the author's sagacity and great skill in balancing the principles of social sciences with theological statements add depth and lasting value to the book as an itinerary in this field.

While explaining the scope and purpose in the copious introduction the author stresses on the necessity of the study of anthropological method and of attitudinal change. The volume consists of three chapters and in order to consolidate the thesis he presents the hypothesis, descriptions about the masterly survey conducted and the tabulation of the data separately at the end of the book. Also, the table of contents as in the doctoral thesis is given in view of reference. Chapter I deals with the anthropological method in catechesis. It is vividly pointed out that the human situation is the starting point for religious experience and religious formation. The functions of anthropology in catechesis, the stages of anthropological method and the analysis of the situation of youth systematically bring out the need to integrate life and faith. Chapter II, under the title 'Attitude and its Changeability', provides a new understanding to the readers about the congruent change of favourable attitude in the field of faith education. It is asserted that the task of catechesis is not simply to elicit the act of faith in an individual but to develop an attitude of faith corresponding to the fundamental ones of faith, hope and love. Chapter III gives us the pastoral

guidelines for the effectiveness of faith education. The author emphasises on the need for flexibility, creativity and freedom in response to faith. It shows that the scholarly work does not keep away the practical implications.

To sum up, the importance of this book relies on the renewed understanding of catechetical pedagogy. This reviewer is left with the impression that this new approach will be a fruitful guidance to youth animators, teachers of faith education and to the leaders of the church for the review of catechetical content and the method of implication. Therefore, the book deserves a wide circulation.

Mathew Arekalam

Pablo Richard, *Death of Christendoms, Birth of the Church*, Historical Analysis and Theological Interpretation of the Church in Latin America. Forward by Vincent Cosmao, trs, from the French and Spanish by Philip Berryman, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Bks, 1987, pp. x. 213.

This is a scientific analysis of the revolutionary changes that are taking place in the Latin American Church today and their relationship to the region's political, social and economic history. Pablo Richard, a Chilean biblicist and sociologist situates the object of his study within a historical and structural framework. He distinguishes in the historical and epistemological conditions for this social reality elements of a structural nature present within social reality and those of an ideological nature found in the relationship between social reality and social consciousness.

He starts with two basic methodological assumptions that the political, social, cultural and religious spheres are fundamentally determined by the economic infrastructure, and that the economic level is dialectically and relatively determined by the other levels as the very conditions that make possible its unfolding in history and the rationality necessary for making it comprehensible.

Richard divides the Latin American history into three periods:

In the colonial period (1492-1808) the Church sought the mediation of the political society in order to guarantee its presence in civil society and under the superstructure of the patronage of the king it exercised a mediating and integrating function in colonial society as a whole. But the ideal of Christendom continued also after the social and political contradictions had shattered the colonial society. In this second period (1808-1960) even though under the oligarchy the idea of Christendom by its internal contradictions reached a final structural crisis, the church did not question the idea. Even when it could not find the state aid for its presence in society it chose to shore up its power in civil society directly hoping to restore the Christendom model one day. According to Richard this hope had a certain amount of success between 1945 and 1968. But with the bankruptcy of populist, nationalist and developmental models the New Christendom also entered a crisis. In this present period starting with 1960 what is evident is the crisis in which the church/state/civil society relationship breaks down. It is not a crisis of the church but only of the Christendom model, "a crisis of the particular way the church has been present, and exercised power, and historical and structural hegemony in civil society, based on and mediated through an alliance or relationship between church and state" (p. 188). As a result church itself assumed a new role and image through the political radicalization of front-line activists and church leaders. So there is a head on collision between Christendom and the church. In the opinion of Richard if this contradiction continues Christendom will irreversibly die and the church will be reborn.

At the end the author states his central perspective: The rise of a church that is totally at odds with any Christendom project is the basic and decisive element in the process for Latin America to liberate itself from the dominant capitalist and imperialist system. Only within this process of getting beyond Christendom, within the framework of a broader process of political liberation can the church find its own proper identity and mission.

This is a good study that shows the relation between church and state and the complexities of the relation. This model is applicable to a great extent to any country.

John B. Chethimattam